

# Small Archives and Repositories

While Tennessee does not have a particularly strong public records tradition, like most Southerners its people and institutions have been highly conscious of their history. They have, consequently, been great savers of old documents, photographs, manuscripts, and records, creating in the process scores of small archival collections and historical repositories across the state. A fairly complete accounting of these small archives can be found in the following directory. The repositories on this list are organized alphabetically by county, and tend to be small organizations rather than archives of regional significance. Out of the 183 repositories listed, the majority (45%) are county public libraries that have small collections in their local history or genealogy section. The other types of institutions on this list include college or university special collections (21%), small local museums, historical houses, sites, and battlefields (18%), historical societies (5%), churches and religious archives (7%), and other institutions with an interest in preserving their histories (4%).

In order to obtain this information, detailed surveys were sent out to approximately 350 organizations. These were compiled from a general list of historically oriented organizations in Tennessee that could possibly have any type of historical records, including public libraries. Not surprisingly, about one hundred organizations that received the survey reported that they kept no records or very few records,

and they were removed from the list. In many cases, the staff of a small historic house or museum responded that they kept a few letters or several photographs related to the home's history or historical figure of significance, but small holdings such as these, in our opinion, did not constitute an archive. The compiled list is therefore not a definitive directory of all record-holding organizations in Tennessee; rather, only organizations that keep a significant amount of original material are included.

The surveys that were distributed included questions concerning the budget, staffing, collections, facilities, services, and other aspects related to the organization and nature of the repositories. The initial response rate was about 30%, so follow-up phone calls were made in order to obtain the required information. Even with the added interaction of a phone conversation, staff members and volunteers at various organizations often revealed a very limited knowledge of their archival holdings. It is thus possible that some sites have more materials than they are aware of, but in many cases such items are probably not processed or in a state of good conservation.

The condition and organization of the archival holdings varied depending on who manages them and where they are kept. The public libraries are frequently understaffed and are thus unable to devote as much attention to the historical records as might be wished for or needed. During the follow-up calls for the survey, several librarians admitted that they had a very limited knowledge of their local history collections. In many cases, volunteers or members of the local history society manage these records and do not involve the librarian in this process. Furthermore, librarians are typically untrained in the fields of history and archival studies, and they do not always apply archival standards of organization when they attempt to organize the material. Frequently, the library becomes no more than a storage facility of last resort for archival records. Without an archivist on staff

who is sensitive to the preservation and arrangement of original materials, the records may languish in a state of neglect.

This is not always the case, however. Sometimes the local history room/archive is a jewel of the local library system, such as the Cleveland Public Library's History Branch and Archives. In these cases the records repository can become a center of community attention and activity. A typical situation found in Tennessee would be a library that inherits historical materials and family manuscript papers over a period of years or even decades. The library eventually becomes a collecting point and research center for local history and genealogy in the county. This interest in local history is fueled by further collecting and processing of historical records—even records of local government—which can, in turn, lead to the development of a proper archive. Ultimately, the library sometimes ends up hosting a fully-functioning county archive, as in the case of the Benton County Archives. Partnerships between local libraries and county archives have proved to be quite successful and are becoming more and more common in Tennessee.

In some libraries, archival holdings consist primarily of microfilm (usually of county records), but many libraries also have original county and other historical or genealogical records. Typical items held by local public libraries include census records, court records, land grants, marriage records, birth and death

records, wills, military service records, cemetery information obtained from tombstones, obituaries, local newspapers, family records and bibles, scrapbooks, and photographs. Most of these local



history and genealogy rooms are overseen and staffed by members of the county historical societies. In fact, there are a number of examples of cooperation between an historical or genealogical society and the local library, such as the Somerville-Fayette County Library (Fayette County Historical Society) and the Franklin County Public Library (Franklin County Historical Society). In these cases, many of the extant records are kept in the library facility itself.

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Archives kept by colleges and universities are also fairly common in Tennessee. Large colleges and universities, as well as community colleges and small private schools, frequently keep records in the library or even support a professionally staffed archival facility. Typically, a school will oversee a special collections department within the library, such as the special collections at the campus libraries of Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City and Belmont University in Nashville. In other cases, the institution will keep a small archive of school records within the library walls. Many colleges and universities listed are also affiliated with a religious denomination and keep some sort of

religious or denominational records. By serving as a collecting point for these records, they become the denomination's *de facto* archives. The Brother O'Donnell Archives at Christian Brothers University and the Restoration Movement Archives at the Emmanuel School of Religion are good examples of this type of arrangement.



*Library at Rugby*

Small local museums, historical societies, historical houses, sites, and battlefields also occasionally keep manuscripts and historical materials. Many small local museums and historical houses keep a few items of archival significance related to their site's history, such as letters or photographs, but they are not listed unless their holdings are somewhat substantial. Several museums and historical organizations have a considerable range of holdings, such as Historic Rugby in Morgan County, even though their public focus tends to be more oriented towards site-related tourism. Many historical societies also keep substantial records. Some are associated with local libraries, although others are independent operations and keep records (including public records) entirely on their own, such as the Polk County Historical Society and the Scott County Historical Society. In some cases, the historical society

preserves their archival and other holdings in the setting of a local museum staffed by volunteers, such as the Pleasant Hill Historical Society of the Cumberlands. Finally, a few historic battlefields and sites keep important records and donated manuscripts, such as the Andrew Johnson National Historical Site and Shiloh National Military Park.

The remaining category of archives is church or religious archives and those of other private organizations such as hospitals or communes. Some churches were difficult to reach and may, indeed, have records, but they do not possess the formal means of storing or organizing them. The churches included in the list are only those with a designated archivist and significant holdings, such as the New Providence Presbyterian Church in Maryville. Other religious organizations with an archive, such as the Pentecostal Research Center in Cleveland and the Temple Israel Archives in Memphis, are also included. These types of religious archives differ from the ones mentioned earlier in that they are not directly associated with a university.

Archival organization and preservation at the level of the small collections and repositories on this list is fairly specific to each site and somewhat haphazard. It can range from the very good to abysmal. Records may be donated randomly over a long period of time, and volunteer staff will treat them as simply another type of "artifact" rather than documents needing special storage and care. In the absence of archival training, a collecting policy or strategic plan, the handling and arrangement of original materials in small repositories will probably continue to be very uneven.